

VZCZCXRO8228
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHIT #0405/01 2961313
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231313Z OCT 09
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9300
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000405

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GR](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH: ERDOGAN THE BEST POSSIBLE
OPTION, AND FETULLAH GULEN ISN'T BAD EITHER

REF: A. (A) ISTANBUL 271
[1](#)B. (B) ISTANBUL 326
[1](#)C. (C) 05 ISTANBUL 1336
[1](#)D. (D) ISTANBUL 243

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Ecumenical Patriarch joined the Ambassador and Istanbul Consul General for dinner October 15, five days before the Patriarch's departure for the United States. As in previous meetings, the Patriarch praised PM Erdogan as the best option available for Turkey's minority population, citing progress on several issues during the AKP administration, especially with the acquisition of "foundation properties". The Patriarch also shared that he supported Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarigul's bid to form an opposition party, noting that he preferred Sarigul to CHP leader Deniz Baykal as a political opposition. The Patriarch had nothing but positive things to say about self-exiled Muslim philosopher and personality Fetullah Gulen, whom he visited during his 2006 U.S. visit and hopes to see again this visit. End Summary.

Nothing better: AKP and Erdogan

[1](#)2. (C) As in previous meetings, the Patriarch praised Prime Minister Erdogan as the best option available for Turkey's minority populations: "I like Erdogan because he's courageous and reminds me of Ozal. He's a good and open-minded speaker and I prefer Erdogan to any other politician in Turkey" (Ref A). In line with previous comments, the Patriarch said he continues to be very happy with "Erdogan's proposed opening" toward the Armenians, Kurds, and hopefully very soon towards minorities, especially the Greek Orthodox community (Ref B). Specifically, he remains optimistic regarding the opening of Halki following Erdogan's private assurance during an AKP iftar dinner in September that "he had not forgotten us and that he is working silently on our problems."

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Patriarch cited progress on several issues, especially with the acquisition of foundation property (properties belonging to specific minority community foundations). Some small houses near the Patriarchate purchased by the Patriarchate in the recent past were successfully registered in the name of Bishops, the Patriarch, or others. While the Patriarchate lacks a legal personality and is unable to register property in its name, it can register property in the name the Greek Orthodox community foundation controlling the Patriarchate's cathedral, St. George. According to Deacon Joachim Billis, who accompanied the Patriarch to the dinner, the Patriarchate is currently waiting for the decisions of the General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) on the return of 821

separate properties that had been expropriated by Turkey in years past. Like all other minority community foundations, the Greek Orthodox community foundations had until mid-August 2009 to submit such requests. While the Patriarchate lacks foundation status, it played a central role in gathering and submitting to the GDF the requests of all Greek Orthodox community foundations.

¶4. (SBU) The Patriarch characterized the fact that for the past two years foundations have been able to receive donations from abroad as a positive development. Additionally, he noted that foundations on the island of Bozcaada won five trials pertaining to property rights in local courts without having to go through the European Court of Human Rights (as had been the standard process for minority community foundations in property rights cases prior to 2004.)

Patriarch Provided Support to PM Hopeful Mustafa Sarigul

¶5. (C) The Patriarch shared that Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarigul met with him several years ago and asked him to intervene with his Greek friends in the United States to enhance Sarigul's credibility in the United States and bolster his political ambitions for the seat of the Prime Minister. Noting that this was a rather unorthodox - but in his view welcome - approach to politics in Turkey, the Patriarch said that he did mention Sarigul favorably to colleagues in the United States but did not pursue the topic further. The Patriarch referred to Sarigul as the "enemy of Baykal" and

ISTANBUL 00000405 002 OF 002

noted that he prefers Sarigul to Baykal when it comes to opposition to the AKP.

Buddies: Fetullah Gulen and the Ecumenical Patriarch

¶7. (C) The Ecumenical Patriarch visited Muslim philosopher and personality Fetullah Gulen when last in the United States (January 2006) and hopes to see Gulen again while in the United States between October 20 and November 6. (Note: While the Patriarch did not confirm that he would be meeting Gulen, his trip itinerary lists an ecumenical luncheon with New York area religious leaders hosted by American Archbishop Demetrios on October 27. End Note.) The Patriarch was very impressed with Gulen and commented on the quality of his schools. When Gulen was still in Turkey the Patriarch accepted his invitation to visit an FG school in Uskudar, Istanbul. The Patriarch observed that Gulen's reach and diplomatic efforts extend across the globe. He had visited an FG university in Kazakhstan named after former Turkish Prime Minister Sulieman Demirel, and while the Patriarch was in Manila for the opening of the first Greek Orthodox church in the Philippines, a boy presented him with a bouquet of flowers on behalf of the FG school there. The Patriarch commented that FG has activities "everywhere, especially in Russia." (Comment: Given the Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchate's historically contentious relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church (Ref D) - most recently in Ukraine, Estonia, and Turkey - the Patriarch may be appreciative of Gulen's reported activities to build a stronger relationship between the two Orthodox churches. End Comment.)

¶8. (C) Comment: The Patriarch is generally careful not to get involved overtly in Turkish politics but has always privately expressed his negative sentiments about Baykal, and, as the Sarigul "intervention" indicates, is not beyond using his good offices. While the GOT and the Church still don't have a formal dialogue on Halki and other issues, the informal "Minister Bagis-German Ambassador channel" and occasional interfaces between the PM and the Patriarch (at the August 15 Buyukada lunch and September AKP Iftar) mark informal lines of communication that represent improvement in process if not substance. Whether it is substantial progress

depends on what GOT is doing behind the scenes, news of which we eagerly await.

WIENER